



What is the Difference Between a Topic and a Thesis?

A **topic** is the subject you decide to write about. It can be as general as “vegetables” and as specific as “how tomatoes can improve your abs.”

A **thesis** is what you decide to say about the “topic.” The thesis is a specific argument that will be involved in every paragraph of your paper—whether you are introducing it, defending it, or reinforcing it. It is the sole reason for your paper’s existence.

Here are a few examples of topics and possible theses for each one.

Topic: “Gardens and the Environment”

Thesis: 1. “Gardening is helpful to nature.” 2. “Gardening brings us closer to nature.” 3. “Gardening is a threat to the environment’s delicate ecosystem.”

Topic: “Biography of Freud”

Thesis: 1. “Freud’s influence is far-reaching.” 2. “Freud’s life was affected by an early childhood experience.” 3. “One can see a pattern of inner turmoil in Freud’s life.”

Topic: “Topics and Theses”

Thesis: 1. “Topics and theses must never be confused.” 2. “Topics and theses differ in three ways.” 3. “Topics and theses share similarities as well as differences.”

Topic: “Hinduism”

1. “Hinduism has reached many.” 2. “Hinduism is a way of life, not just a religion.” 3. “Is Hinduism the answer?”

Choosing and defending a thesis well can sometimes be difficult. Here are some common mistakes to avoid.

The wandering thesis... Each paper is only meant to have one thesis. This means that whatever you say, whatever arguments you bring into your paper, everything must be centered around the one statement you’ve decided to defend: your thesis. Explaining your thesis is the whole reason you began to write in the first place. However, all too often writers begin their paper with one idea in mind and wander off to another idea halfway through their composition. For instance, if your thesis is “The thematic unity in *Gone with the Wind* centers around Scarlett’s selfishness,” it is not appropriate to spend a great deal of time stressing the importance of one of the minor characters. Although both theses may apply to the novel, your paper is meant to have only one thesis. Bringing in any points that do not directly support and affirm your statement (even if they are very interesting) only confuses the reader, and makes him or her wonder what you are trying to say.

The wrong-sized thesis... Before you begin to write your rough draft, it is important to recognize how many pages are required, and whether or not you'll be able to support your thesis in that amount of space. For example, if your professor assigns a two-page essay, it is not appropriate to try to thoroughly explore God's relationship to time through the eyes of six major philosophers; this is way too broad. Likewise, if you have to write a twenty-page research paper, choosing to explain why watermelon is your favorite snack will be much too narrow. Instead, you need to find the thesis of the right size; it should interest you enough so that you can write about it for a number of pages, but it should also be narrow enough that you will be able to cover it thoroughly. As some professors like to say, "I'd rather you write a paper that's an inch wide and a mile deep, than an inch deep and a mile wide."

Original material copyright © Dallas Baptist University. All rights reserved. Other copyrighted material included by permission or authorization. Created by UWC Staff for Dallas Baptist University. <http://www.dbu.edu/uwc>